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Márquez Quevedo, Javier

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Márquez Quevedo, J. (2010). Telecommunications and colonial rivalry: European telegraph cables to the Canary Islands and Northwest Africa, 1883-1914. *Historical Social Research*, 35(1), 108-124. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.35.2010.1.108-124>

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# Telecommunications and Colonial Rivalry: European Telegraph Cables to the Canary Islands and Northwest Africa, 1883-1914

Javier Márquez Quevedo \*

**Abstract:** »Telekommunikation und kolonialer Wettstreit: Europäische Telegraphenkabel zu den Kanarischen Inseln und nach Nordwestafrika, 1883-1914« The first submarine telegraphic cable which linked the Canary Islands with the Spanish mainland was inaugurated in 1883. After only one year, the cable reached Senegal, and a decade later, the islands were already connected to Brazil. At a first stage the network was exploited by prestigious English and French companies which had been in charge of its construction and its technological aspects.

Beyond the local socioeconomic significance this first telegraph cable had for the local society, the Canary Islands, given their geostrategical situation, became a stage for the rivalry between the European countries as regards the colonisation of Africa. Part of the communications with Northwest Africa, and with South America, had a necessary intermediate landing site on the islands. Issues regarding the ownership of the network, the control of its functioning or the possibility of its interruption were vital for the imperialist projects of Western powers in their open competition with each other. Telegraph cables are a good example of the degree of intervention to which this geographical area was subjected by industrial capitalist countries.

This article analyses the way in which this telecommunications system influenced the geopolitical situation of the Canary Islands and their African *hinterland*. Also, it deals with the hidden fights between the European powers in their quest to hold control of this system, as well as the resulting pressure the Spanish government experienced in the pre-First World War years.

**Keywords:** Telegraph, submarine cables, Atlantic Ocean, Africa, Canary Islands, imperialism.

## The Geopolitical Context

The international competition for taking control over the northwest part of Africa was intensified during the last decades of the 19th century. This area covered a vast maritime-terrestrial territory which stretched from the Azores to

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\* Address all communications to: Javier Márquez Quevedo, Contemporary History Lecturer, Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Departamento de Ciencias Históricas, C/Pérez del Toro 1, 35003, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Canary Islands, Spain; e-mail: jmarquez@dch.ulpgc.es.

Morocco and from Madeira and the Canaries to Senegal and Cape Verde. The European colonial powers competed for its main strategic resources through priority rights over mining production or through the concessions for new channels of communication: ports, railways and telegraph cables.

After 1900, the Franco-German rivalry in Morocco and Western Sahara increased. Since then, German traders also flocked to the Canaries. Their interests had increased considerably and their companies and productions became significant competitors to those of British capitalists. The trade boost also led them to Madeira, the Azores or Cape Verde, in an attempt to control its telegraphic or maritime communications.

Germany tried to attain a position in the Azores, Madeira, the Canaries and Morocco avoiding a head-on crash with Great Britain. As the Portuguese islands turned out to be a hard assignment, Berlin determined to focus on the Canaries – a decision that crashed with the sensitivity of the English, who harshly criticised it.<sup>1</sup> The latter thought it their duty to prevent the archipelago from becoming an enemy base by granting several “peaceful” advantages such as telegraphic cables, coal deposits or radio stations.

Telegraphy arrived at the Canaries quite soon compared to the technological development of the region. Ports and submarine cables were the technical and industrial features which stood out in these small backward islands supported on an agrarian economic scheme. It is not a coincidence that the British were responsible for the construction and, at the same time, the main beneficiaries, since the mid-Atlantic islands played a substantial role in the imperialist projects in Africa. The *Daily Mail* even reported that the government of the Free State of Congo was negotiating a deal on the archipelago with Madrid.<sup>2</sup> It was said that King Leopold of Belgium planned to buy the islands in order to use them as a sanatorium and coaling station.

In France it was believed that England would probably occupy the Canaries in case of a naval war, mainly to prevent another foreign power to do it. Concerns also rose over the German strategies in the North of Africa.<sup>3</sup> The navy had settled down in the port of Mogador at Morocco’s Atlantic coast, very close to the Spanish archipelago. Moreover, its worried competitors were carefully watching the German trade offensive on Fernando Poo Island and the

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<sup>1</sup> António José Telo, *Os Açores e o Controlo do Atlântico* (Porto: Edições Asa, 1993), 43-59.

<sup>2</sup> “Canary Islands may go next. Congo offers Spain £167.000 for them”, *Daily Mail*, June 14, 1899; Letter from Francis Bertie to Edward Grey, January 3, 1907, National Archives, London [NA]: FO 800/179.

<sup>3</sup> Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes [CADN]: Consulat à Las Palmas, Rapports, Série B/3. “Germans in Canary Isles: Reports Development of German Commercial Enterprise in the Canary Islands, 1905 (Confidential)”, NA: FO 72/2219.

Eastern Atlantic. It was even said that Spain would sell them the Guinean island.<sup>4</sup>

The *Woermann-Linie*, with its factories located in Bata and Elobey, was the soundest among the four German firms operating in Spanish Guinea, north of Gabon. It had invested a significant amount of capital there and carried out a very active domestic trade with the native traders from the hinterland, a place not many Europeans had ever reached. It was even capable of competing with English companies such as *Holt* or *Hatton & Cookson*, which had already been in that area for a long time. The French and British conquerors considered it a significant menace, especially when it finally managed to control the smuggling of rubber, which was cheaply delivered from the north coast by the convoy coming from the Ivindo basin. Thus having a coaling station and a cable landing base in the Canaries would generate benefits for the German firm.

Telegraph cables are also a good example of the European interventionism in the kingdom of Morocco. Spain watched closely and with great concerns how Western capitalism entered this country, as it had an impact on the stability of its southern frontiers.<sup>5</sup> At the end of the 19th century, Morocco was already connected with the rest of the world – just via English cables. This led to the fact that in 1894 the death of the Sultan could be hushed up for a day and a half – time enough for London to guarantee its interests. France complained bitterly about this.

In 1887, the English *Eastern Telegraph Company* had managed to lay a cable between Gibraltar and Tangier. Only years later, France would link itself Marseille, Oran and Tangier by a strategic network. In order to get rid of the Franco-British pressure, the Sultan of Morocco endeavoured to strengthen the friendship with Germany while imposing restrictions on companies of other European powers.<sup>6</sup> So this, the creation of a territorial area of German influence, was an essential factor to which England and France would tenaciously oppose.

The underlying issue, which is studied in this article, is how the submarine telegraph cables became a subject of intense rivalry between Germany and the new Franco-British entente. The Canary Islands were one of the scenes where this struggle took place. The Germans tried to use the islands in order to link their cables to the Atlantic Africa and even considered the possibility of entering the telegraphic communication of Morocco, which was then under an increasing French influence.

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<sup>4</sup> Archivo del Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Madrid [AMAE]: Correspondencia, Alemania, H2290.

<sup>5</sup> Marqués de Villa-Urrutia, *Cartas al Ministro de Estado (1907-1909)* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1994), 33-34.

<sup>6</sup> João Cosme, “Marrocos visto através da correspondência da legação portuguesa em Tânger (1886-1894),” *Islenha* 25 (1999): 69.

Therefore, France and especially Britain tried to prevent or hinder the laying of these German cables. First, they tried to put pressure on Spain forcing it to refuse a German landing in Tenerife. Then they impeded an extension to Africa and South America. The governments of Paris and London could not maintain their cablegraphic monopoly in this area, which was broken by the German cable construction between Emden and the Canaries. Nevertheless, they did determine the Spanish prohibition of establishing an extension between the islands and Morocco.

## Telegraph Cables between the Canaries and Africa

After the war in 1898, the USA decided to keep the island of Guam because of its valuable role as a coaling station on the route to Japan, China, Korea and the Philippines but also wanted to establish a location to land the transpacific telegraph cable. As a result of the war between Spain and the USA, every nation strove for owning the lines that connected its many territories. The control over communications became another element to stress the rivalry among European powers, giving rise to the so-called submarine cables war. At this, new imperialist nations quarrelled, such as the USA or Germany.

In this period there were about six submarine cables in the Atlantic Ocean and two large African systems: that of Aden-Zanzibar-Mozambique-Durban, in Eastern Africa, and that of Lisbon-Madeira to Accra, in the Gold Coast. Accra and Durban city were connected straight to Cape Town, where both systems were joined.<sup>7</sup> Great Britain played a dominant role in this network. It was in control of the main telegraphic market, that of the North Atlantic area. When German and French companies wanted to compete with the British ones, they therefore had to approach their governments; they even had to turn into private companies but just in name.<sup>8</sup>

In Spain, the national network of electric telegraphy was developed in the second half of the 19th century.<sup>9</sup> The first submarine cable that linked the Canaries and the Iberian Peninsula was officially opened in 1883. A year later, it had already been extended to Saint-Louis in Senegal, through a link to the French cable of Western Africa. The connection was operated by the English *Spanish National Submarine Telegraph C<sup>o</sup>*. In 1893, the Spanish authorities recovered the management of the cable between Cadiz and Tenerife Island. The repairs were granted – regardless of the company running the landing – to the

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<sup>7</sup> Ángel Calvo, “Los cables submarinos: una rama emergente de la ingeniería civil en el siglo XIX”, *Quaderns d’Història de l’Enginyeria* 5 (2002-2003): 202-203.

<sup>8</sup> Daniel R. Headrick and Pascal Griset, “Submarine Telegraph Cables: Business and Politics, 1838-1939,” *The Business History Review* 75, no. 3 (2001): 544.

<sup>9</sup> Luís Enrique Otero Carvajal, “Las telecomunicaciones en la España contemporánea, 1855-2000,” *Cuadernos de Historia Contemporánea* 29 (2007): 119-152.

English *India Rubber Gutta Percha and Telegraph C<sup>o</sup>*, which was supervised by a parliamentary committee.

In 1892, the telegraph line Tenerife-Saint-Louis was stretched to Recife, former Pernambuco, in Brazil, by another English company: *The South American Cable C<sup>o</sup>*. This firm was later acquired by the French government. However, the attempt to lay a line from Tenerife to Havana, also connecting Vieques Island, next to Puerto Rico, never thrived. The implementation of this project was decided shortly before the 1898 war. Since the budget was far from covering such excessive costs, there was no bidding. The project was thwarted as Spanish foreign policy was now focused on northwestern Africa instead of America, which was already considered to be lost. At the same time the line of Saint-Louis, and later that of Dakar, were connected to another British cable owned by the *Eastern Telegraph Company*, which reached Bathurst, that is, Banjul, in Gambia.

The telegraphic communication network in western French Africa was completed in 1903. The main line was laid from the coast of Senegal to Say, at the Niger River. And from that point, it branched out towards Guinea, the Ivory Coast and Benin, formerly Dahomey. Thus, the most relevant cities and settlements of the French colonies in black Africa were connected by telegraph lines to the general governor of Dakar and among themselves. France had strove hard for laying and acquiring its own cables with the purpose of being completely independent from foreign lines. From Konakri and Grand Bassam, at the Ivory Coast, its network reached to remote Libreville, capital city of French Congo.<sup>10</sup>

The major drawback for them was the lack of a direct cable which connected the metropolis with Western Africa. France only had the control over the Saint-Louis cable up to the Canaries. And, in fact, the branch of Saint-Louis-Yoff Bay-Dakar was owned by *India Rubber*. Until 1904 these lines made up the main connection between France and Senegal. In order to solve this problem a new cable from Brest to Dakar was introduced, which finally re-established the network as a French product.

Germany wanted to have a similar network for its African colonies. In January, 1900, the French consulate in Württemberg warned about what the *Berliner Tageblatt* was stating: the imperial government planned to lay a submarine cable from the Canaries and Cape Verde to western German Africa and connect that point to the Indian coast by an overland line crossing the Belgian Congo.<sup>11</sup> It was the first time this European power showed interest in the African cables issue.

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<sup>10</sup> "Military Report on the French West-African Colonies of Senegal, Guinea, Ivory Coast and Dahomey. Confidential. Intelligence Department. War Office. 1903," NA: FO 881/8050.

<sup>11</sup> CADN: Madrid, Ambassade, Série B/571.

The colonial lobbies from England and France were concerned about the arrival of German telegraph companies to Morocco. In Fez, at the end of 1906, an engineer, expert on wireless telegraphy and ballooning, tried to recruit native work force. Berlin insisted on having a coaling station and a telegraphic link in the mid-Atlantic, although Portugal did not allow it to consider Madeira as an option.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, the Atlantic archipelagos were essential strategic points for inter-continental telegraphic connections. The struggle for getting the control over these lines stimulated British diplomacy to negotiate a treaty which secured British priority in the area. Its aim was to achieve, first from Portugal and then from Spain, an unmistakable commitment to not give concessions or transfer national rights or properties to a third party, especially, with regard to ports and cables.

### The German Projects over the Telegraphic Cables in Atlantic Africa: The End of the Anglo-French Monopoly

When, early in the 20th century, the German Government wanted to lay a submarine cable to connect with their colonies in Atlantic Africa and with the South American countries, it was found out that the area between the Azores, the Canaries and Morocco was kept for British and French cables. However, Germany did not renounce this goal, which was central to the colonial aspirations. This is the reason why they started negotiations with the Spanish government about the Canary Islands as a first station for its submarine cable landing.

The German cable network advanced across the world and had put the Shanghai-Yap-Manado-Guam telegraph system into operation. This route linked the German territories in Eastern Asia to the Dutch part of the East Indies, and was, by another section, connected via the American cable in the Pacific Ocean with the transatlantic German line to the metropolis. Thus, it seemed obvious to plan the extension of the cables towards the South Atlantic. In order to complete this global network, Germany focused on South America and western Africa.<sup>13</sup>

The progressive development of German protectorates in Togo, Cameroon and south western Africa, the relevance of economic interests which have not been treated yet, and the need of an organized management required a cable

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<sup>12</sup> "German Schemes in Madeira. 1906," NA: FO 185/1019; 1097; 1059.

<sup>13</sup> "Kabelverbindung zwischen Deutschland einerseits, Brasilien und Westafrika anderseits. 1906," Auswärtiges Amt, Politisches Archiv [AAPA], Berlin: Botschaft Madrid [BM]/449/B2.

connection to the metropolis safe from foreign powers. An example of this are the lines to south western Africa, which Germany had to rent from the British.

The most profitable way to lay a cable to Brazil or to western Africa – from a technical and financial point of view – would have been to place it in Portugal, Madeira and the Cape Verde Islands. However, the English *Western Telegraph Company*, which owned the Lisbon-Madeira-Saint Vincent-Pernambuco cable, had received from the Portuguese government the monopoly over the connection between Portugal, the aforementioned islands and Brazil.

The option of laying a branch from the Azores and southwards could not be taken into account either (on Fayal Island a cable from *Deutsch-Atlantische Telegraphengesellschaft* (DAT) was landed) because the Portuguese government did not give the requested special permission, due to its commitment to *Western Telegraph*.

In order to overcome the difficulties caused by the British monopoly it was even proposed to send the cables directly to their destination, which turned out to be technically impossible. After all, the German attempt to communicate through the English companies located in Portuguese territory failed as well. Berlin knew perfectly well that Great Britain would hinder the execution of the German plan either in an obvious or a secret way.

Given the circumstances the most advisable action for the German government was to connect the metropolis with South America and western Africa via the Canary Islands. This connection was less favourable from the technical point of view, due to the greater length of the cable, but on the other hand it also promised to be useful route if it was properly laid.

A direct cable connection between Germany and the Iberian Peninsula already existed, the Emden-Vigo line. It had been built in 1896 by *Deutsche See-Telegraphengesellschaft* and at the end of 1904 the Imperial Post Office forced DAT – founded in Cologne in 1899 – to buy it. Initially the Emden-Vigo cable was meant to connect Germany to North America; but the route via the Azores seemed to be more suitable to link Emden to New York. DAT had been in charge of finishing that telegraphic project. But apart from this, the Emden-Vigo cable was becoming more and more important due to its annual increase of traffic.

Apart from the main connection Vigo-Tenerife, Germany was speculating about the possibility of “later” extending a branch towards the Moroccan coast. They were almost sure that the French opposition would make some noise against a German connection in Tenerife. The Cadiz-Tenerife cable had been working before 1906 as a relevant link between the French cables of Marseille-Oran-Tangier-Cadiz and Tenerife-Saint Louis in Senegal.

The Imperial Government thought its plan would, in spite of all handicaps, succeed. After achieving an independent system thanks to the recently laid cable from Brest to Dakar, France considered the relevance of Tenerife as



strategic point on cable landings to have decreased. Furthermore, Germany did not aspire at all to get a monopoly of telegraphic lines in the Canaries.

The cable arrived at Tenerife at the first stage of the project. There, the contract with the Spanish government would make clear the need of continuing southward, so later, when the necessary landing rights of some other places were acquired, they could easily face the expected difficulties. The company in charge of building the cable, *Felten und Guillaume*, from Mülheim-am-Rhein, would be supported by a powerful financial consortium.

From the German point of view, the Canaries' significance as a transit area would then increase, and the Spanish Atlantic enclaves would have a powerful telegraphic connection. Considering these advantages, Germany hoped that the Spanish government would agree with its projects.

### The Cables "War": The Anglo-French Opposition to the German Telegraphic Project between Emden and the Canaries

Germany gave a new boost to its telegraphic project and announced its intention to negotiate with Spain a line between Emden and the Canaries. This action provoked a fierce opposition by the governments of France and Great Britain, and by the affected British companies as well. The matter may be understood as a real economic and diplomatic "war" with obvious implications for the future.

Only when the Algeiras Conference was over, the government of the Kaiser asked the Spanish authority to negotiate a contract to lay a telegraph cable from the Emden enclave – in the North Sea – to the Canaries, which, in principle would have a halfway link in Vigo. This happened in April 1906.

The German decision of connecting its colonies by telegraph with its own system revolutionized the communications prospect in the northwest of Africa. What until 1905 had been a field ruled by two complete opposites, the British and the French securing a certain counterweight regarding the route and the use of the service, would be altered by the trade war between the new western allied and Berlin.

In summer 1906, the German cable-ship *Grossherzog von Oldenbourg* stayed several days in Las Palmas. During this period it made some test drillings at the landing point of the Gran Canaria-Lanzarote cable.

The French consulate put forward that a hydrographical study would be undertaken about a cable from Emden that hooked in the Azores, would touch the Canaries and then extend to Cameroon and other colonies in German western Africa.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> CADN: Consulat à Las Palmas, Série B/8.

A German company had also proposed to the Spanish government to repair and complete the internal telegraphic connections between the Canary Islands, in exchange for the permission to land “its cable” in the archipelago. Some months before the European press had announced that the cabinet of the Kaiser had already decided to set up a line to Africa, that they would not wait for the Canaries to be one of their stations, and eventually this line would compete with the new French cable from Brest to Dakar.

The British expressed their concern for the first time to the Spanish authority in a *note verbale* about the German project. Their ambassador Maurice De Bunsen sent it to the Spanish Minister of State on 10 July 1906. In this, Madrid was requested to suspend any decision about the landing of a telegraph cable in the Canaries for the moment. The English and the French were sure that Spain would cooperate with them against the German projects. In turn, the Spanish government tried to delay the decision on the German proposal as much as possible. The successive cabinet changes in 1906, a politically unstable year, contributed to this.

The French consulate in the Canaries maximized the surveillance over the actions of the German ship, in order to send a detailed report of its stay as soon as possible. Every inquiry was to be done confidentially, but Paris also contacted the Spanish State Department to warn it: the first step towards the collapse of the “balance” enjoyed among the European powers regarding to communication networks, was taking place. Thus, the French diplomacy gave fresh impetus to the efforts of achieving a Hispanic-French agreement on the North-west part of Africa. The design of a new telegraphic *status quo*, beneficial for both sides, was considered.

The reports of the British Board of Trade were quite clear about the German cables. These would seriously harm the interests of Great Britain and France. The cable would mean a fatal competition for the Cadiz-Tenerife line, for that from Brest to Dakar, and for the routes by Madeira and Noronha as well. Likewise, it would mean for Spain losing the benefits which resulted from the Algeciras Conference, especially the international support that both France and Great Britain provided.

The Board of Trade was wondering if for Madrid a landing rights guarantee to Germany was worth the sacrifice of that new diplomatic position. And finally, it speculated that these landing rights might be a bad precedent whereby other governments or companies might apply for any kind of “absurd concessions.”<sup>15</sup>

The British Admiralty came to the conclusion that the requested cable was very important from a strategic point of view and that “it would lead to the undesirable strengthening of the German communications in the case of war.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> NA: MT 10/1017.

<sup>16</sup> NA: FO 185/1020.

It advised its government to make a counteroffer, that is, laying a cable between the Iberian Peninsula, Madeira and the Canaries. The idea of connecting the Spanish archipelago to Madeira and Saint Vincent was also part of an alternative plan presented by *Eastern Telegraph C<sup>o</sup>*.

The Germans, too, had the support from the Spanish Navy Department and from other State agencies, which by the way, encouraged the Germans to use the diplomatic channels. For these pro-German, the project from *Felten* would improve the opportunities of the Spanish outside communication, especially with the Canary Islands and to the South American republics. Regarding the latter, they counted on significant economic interests of the Spanish emigrants. Besides, the European colonies in Southern Africa were undergoing a great commercial expansion and this made it tempting to combine telegraphy and shipping towards this area.<sup>17</sup>

At first, *Eastern Telegraph C<sup>o</sup>* wanted to act unilaterally. In those days it was the most important cable company in the world. It offered to build a new cable between Cadiz and the Canaries free of charge. In return, it would control exclusively the construction of other telegraph cables from the islands to the mainland or to any foreign territory. *India Rubber* also tried to take advantage of this situation by offering its services in exchange for the rights of the telegraphic communications with the Canaries, except for the French cable to Senegal. There was no connection between this offer and the one submitted by *Eastern Telegraph C<sup>o</sup>*. Both companies were determined to compete hard with each other.

Nevertheless, political interests have priority over the free market laws. In order to stifle the German initiative taken on the field of submarine cables, the allied European nations tried to establish a front company which would enable them to keep the telegraphic communications between the Canaries and western Africa as a monopoly. In order to carry out this project, an offer to the Spanish government would be drawn up through a political and business plot which would gather the English, French and Spanish shareholders. The idea started from a private initiative and was supported by the British and French governments.

A company of shareholders called *Compañía Cablegráfica Española* would be created which would then establish a public contract with the government of Madrid. The company would be "Spanish" in name and would be constituted according to the law of this country. Any English or French reference in its name was omitted. It would have the exclusive rights to lay cables from the Iberian Peninsula, the Canaries and the Spanish territories in western Africa to any other foreign area.

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<sup>17</sup> AAPA: BM/449/B1.

The intention was obvious: this “company” offered to the Spanish government to set, free of charge, a cable between Cadiz and the Canaries in exchange for being granted the monopoly over all the telegraph landings starting from Spanish territory to north western Africa. The document for the creation of *Compañía Cablegráfica Española* was prepared by the managers of *Eastern Telegraph Company* and a senior official of the French administration. The agreement contained a secret clause in order to prevent Spain from hindering France to exercise its right of property over a cable between the Canaries and Morocco.<sup>18</sup>

According to its developers, the agreement would result in the consolidation of “the natural relationship of Spain with France and England, as they all were undertaken to the Morocco’s issue.” The French and the British had agreed to state to the Spanish government that both power’s interests were brought into agreement. And the cables issue was extremely important. Thus, the landing of a German cable in Morocco would be an injurious situation for them. During the previous months, French had lobbied hard. From that moment, though, London was to take over the main role in this matter.

However, the Spanish government declined the offer from the so-called *Compañía Cablegráfica Española*. This would have meant to prejudice the legitimate German aspirations to get a cable landing in the Canaries. The Secretary of State, Manuel Allendesalazar, confirmed that the cable issue was a delicate matter to Spain. His opinion was that “an acceptable solution for everyone” could be reached, that is, to reconcile the German ambitions with the “Spanish” political and sovereignty interests, through some effective guarantees.<sup>19</sup> Allendesalazar clearly saw that they were stuck in a very difficult situation and that it would be quite hard for his government to please everyone. Contrary to what may be thought, he wrote to his ambassador in Berlin that it would be the Spanish interests – not the outside pressure – which would decide.

The common position of France and Great Britain in this issue came to an end after the failure of that strategy. France stated that its interest on the issue of cables in the Canaries had been reduced to a single point: to prevent the German cable to extend to Morocco. If Berlin relinquished the extension, there would not be any other reason to object to the German request to the Spanish government. England could only hope that the telegraph cable that was intended for the Canaries would not compete with its lines between Europe and South America.

Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Secretary, would find himself in a serious predicament if he had to veto the German request and come into a conflict with the Kaiser government. The first questions in Grey’s department about the

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<sup>18</sup> CADN: Madrid, Ambassade, Série B/571. NA: FO 185/1023.

<sup>19</sup> AMAE: Fondo Manuel Allendesalazar, correspondencia con los jefes de misiones diplomáticas y consulares en el extranjero, Serie B/7.

advisability of keeping a strong opposition towards the German cable had emerged in early 1907. If at that moment, Germany only wanted to lay an oceanic cable, this attitude would seem a provocation. Grey proposed that a restricted agreement between Berlin and Madrid would be "the best available solution."<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, if Spain were capable to resist the French and British lobbying, in those days it would be better for London to accept the situation than to oppose and fail.

As hard to believe as it might seem, a tacit agreement in this conflict between Great Britain and Germany was possible. The English companies would be still monopolizing the cable between Cadiz and the Canaries, but they also would accept his rival's right to land in the islands, leaving out the north part of Africa.<sup>21</sup> This matter would be solved following only political criteria, not economic. Nevertheless, the French position was still strong and would have to be taken into account in order to have a final determination.

The UK would accept to grant a landing to Germany on three conditions: first, Germany should desist from extending this cable to Morocco. Secondly, this cable should directly connect Emden and the Canaries without a halfway landing in Vigo. This would push the construction costs up and would reduce its capacity of work. Therefore the cable would not be as competitive and Germany could not cut prices. The argument used was that national security did not allow a foreign company to link two Spanish cities telegraphically. However, the English companies did have cables between Marseille and Algeria or Turkey and Egypt. Some more British cables in the Far East or in America or even some French or American lines were under the same circumstances. Finally, Berlin would have the landing but would not have the right to set up a telegraphic station on the islands. This involved a thorough revision on the total opposition policy which had been followed up to these days. It also provided the Spanish government some relief.

In March 1907 Madrid made an initial offer to Germany that included the British terms. The conditions imposed by the Foreign Office in order to approve the cable to Tenerife were analyzed in France. The first one was very clear and accurate; it satisfied the French government main wish. Even then, the French experts concluded that their telegraphic interests were not protected enough under the conditions drawn by London.

The German tried to prevent, unsuccessfully, a direct cable between Emden and the Canaries, which made them to submerge 1200 miles of heavy cable. They always suspected that the English lobbying was behind the Spanish firmness. The Spanish ambassador in Berlin had to convince the German government that lobbying was not the reason for the Spanish attitude. Madrid authorized to extend the Tenerife cable to a point on the African coast below the 7°

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<sup>20</sup> NA: FO 185/1021; 1043.

<sup>21</sup> AAPA: BM/449/B1.

parallel north latitude and to another point in South America. In turn, the Spanish government would renew its request already done in 1902 to link Cameroon and Fernando Po Island with a German cable.

Finally, Berlin accepted the conditions. The landing point in Africa was established in the Republic of Liberia. Germany could not longer allow itself to depend on foreign cable sections for its Atlantic communications.<sup>22</sup> Although it was much more expensive, Germany would finally opt for a direct cable with the Canaries. Allendesalazar concluded that the matter was “virtual and properly done. Whatever they said, the ‘favour’ was of great importance. It would provide the German companies a powerful way to compete with other countries.” Nevertheless, the resignation that Germany showed when accepting the conditions and even its commitment to not insist ever was a surprise for the Spanish government. In Madrid they were afraid of the Germans competing again in the future.

The agreement was described by France as a serious attack to its interests. The penetration of the German telegraphic lines in the South Atlantic meant a great failure for them. As it was considered a *fait accompli*, they had to focus on reducing its effects. In this context, it seemed advisable to set up a French submarine connection between the Canaries and the coast of Morocco, and to test the possibilities of connecting the cable from Saint-Louis to Tenerife with the Tangier-Oran-Marseille network. The idea was having its own safe channel just in case the Brest-Dakar cable failed.

Rumours about the cable were still circulating in spite of the agreement. It was said that a German company was negotiating with the Spanish government the construction of a cable line between Spain and Morocco as well as Guinea. It was also commented that the Emden-Tenerife line would cross the Atlantic Ocean and America to finally connect with the transpacific cables. It was also said that the *Reich* had appealed to the Algeciras Conference, as it would have acquired the right to land a cable in Maghreb on equal terms as Spain, France and England.<sup>23</sup>

In August 1907, the Spanish government would seal a pact with Paris and London in order to “never” assign the telegraphic link between the Canaries and Morocco to any “foreign” company. In order to face Berlin’s decision taking the cable to South America, France conceived a last anti-German strategy. The plan involved to go ahead by offering to link Dakar and Pernambuco through the Canaries. This would result in a main line between Brazil and the west coast of Africa, which would make the Brazilian government to doubt the profitability of the German offering.

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<sup>22</sup> “Translation of Extract from Dr. August Röper, *Die Unterseekabel* (Leipzig: Georg Böhme, 1910),” NA: CAB 16/14.

<sup>23</sup> *Daily Telegraph*, May 18, 1907. *Hamburger Nachrichten*, May 23, 1907.

In late 1908 the Emden-Tenerife line was officially opened. In Berlin this achievement was given a great relevance. They talked proudly about the worldwide German network and the link to other areas where they had many important trade interests.<sup>24</sup> Even though the setting up of the cable had been awarded to *Felten und Guilleaume*, it was DAT which finally laid and operated it from 1909 on.

The ambition of the German projects was restricted by the English and French lobbying. Accepting the final Spanish offer was the only option left. However, the *Reich* wanted to compete with the British communications system as a short-term objective. It had opened the way to complete its own worldwide network.

## Conclusions

The concessions for telegraphic landings granted to foreign powers had lead to a worsening of the Spanish interests. Because of that, Spain could not enjoy the benefits that the telegraphic circulation would have originated due to its unique geographical situation. For instance, the line to Dakar – which usually transmitted a very significant amount of messages to the west of Africa – was out of its control. However, due to its own weakness in the imperialist context, it was unable to get rid of those requests.

The German government put hard pressure on the Spanish Administration in order to make it consent to the cable in the Canaries. The lobbying turned into threats to such an extent that Berlin could refuse the extension of its commercial agreement with Spain, and replace it by “war” duties. But the German harshness towards Spain was softened during 1907, and the Commercial Treaty about the Most Favoured Nation was finally signed by both countries after the resolution of the cable issue.

The Canaries could play a role similar to that of the Azores regarding the German cables. The Portuguese islands were the link of the telegraphic communications to North America, while the Spanish archipelago would be the link to South America and all the colonies in the west coast of Africa: Togo, Cameroon and Walfisch Bay or Swakopmund, in south western Africa.<sup>25</sup> With regards to communications with Africa, Berlin could even count on the collaboration of Portugal and Belgium, as the Portuguese colonies and the Congo would profit in the future from a link to German territories.

The French telegraph system in the Atlantic was simpler than that owned by the English companies. But it was not managed by private companies. It was a state property, operated by the government and its profits were invested in the

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<sup>24</sup> MAE: Política Exterior, Alemania, Leg. H2290.

<sup>25</sup> APA: BM/449/B1.

Exchequer. Due to its routes of the lines, to South America or Brazil, the French system could be proportionally more threatened than the British cables.

The recent cable Brest-Dakar and its extensions to the Congo and Brazil were not the only ones threatened by the German project. The German cable system would include – besides the direct lines from its metropolis to Western Africa and South America – another section which from Brazil was meant to connect to the Emden cable in New York. This new competitor caused deep concern for the *Compagnie Française des Câbles*, which was operating in the Antilles and in the USA with French state capital.

In the opinion of the French government, the success of the German project would throw entire years of Moroccan and African policies overboard. The main reason for France to purchase the Brazil cable from *South American C<sup>o</sup>* was to prevent it from becoming a German property. This involved a significant economic effort in order to struggle against Germany in the Atlantic.

However, with the passing of time, the rivalry between France and Germany regarding the submarine cables tended to get mitigated, paradoxically few years before the World War. In 1910 Paris and Berlin would connect their systems through a cable branch between Brest and Emden, sharing a Euro-African line. Both European powers had agreed to merge their projects in the South Atlantic towards Brazil, Togo and Cameroon. This would benefit both sides commercially despite the public opinion from both countries that did not trust in these agreements in middle of the Moroccan crisis that almost led them to war<sup>26</sup>.

Great Britain lobbied as well. First, they claimed the withdrawal of the concession of the cable to the Canaries and then the restriction of its conditions. The Foreign Office paid as much attention as the French did to the decisions on the submarine cable issue made by Berlin. The British telegraph companies were the first to raise the alarm on this matter. Since 1875 *Eastern and Western Telegraph Company* monopolized the cables service in the west and south of Africa, as in Brazil and Argentina. They took advantage of the landing monopoly that Portugal had granted them over all its territories. That is exactly what they were trying to achieve in Spain, but could not.

Sir Francis Bertie, British ambassador in Paris, was among the first advocates of the Anglo-Spanish collaboration. He considered that the interests of the British companies and their investments in the telegraph industry, were an argument good enough to stop the hiring applied by Germany. In his opinion, the global needs and the threat to the balance of powers themselves justified an agreement with the government of Madrid<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel R. Headrick and Pascal Griset, "Submarine Telegraph Cables," 567.

<sup>27</sup> Letter to the Foreign Undersecretary Charles Hardinge, November 23, 1905, NA: FO 800/179.



The British wanted to have a good negotiator in Madrid who could spur the Spanish signing a guarantee agreement with them. This would keep Germany away from the Spanish islands. In exchange, they would guarantee security in Gibraltar, what represented a key factor in the Anglo-Spanish relationship. As Portugal and France were under the British scope, Germany only had the Spanish or Dutch territories left to try to obtain some coaling stations and telegraph landing points.

The possibility of landing a German cable in Morocco was a matter of extreme concern for the British. Its reports stated constantly that the true German aim was to land a cable in the Moroccan west coast, probably in Casablanca. This would work as a starting point for a telegraphic network that surrounded the entire country. Thus, Germany would develop a public works plan in the north of Morocco with direct assistance from Spain.

However, the option of lying a cable to Morocco – a real obsession of the British and French in 1906 and 1907 – did not seem to be an inescapable priority to the Imperial government, at least during those years. This does not mean that Germany would not try it several times, for instance, in 1909, during the negotiations for a Hispanic-German agreement about Morocco. In this process Germany requested to extend its cable from the Canaries, which was not accepted.

The German cable could not only cause the British telegraph companies serious harm, but especially was a very important threat to Britain's naval supremacy. The experts of the Foreign Office thought that the intention of the German company was to damage the "universal predominance" that Great Britain had over the submarine telegraphic communications and that they would spare no resources. A German cable between the Canaries, or Monrovia, and Brazil would extend to the USA, completing a global circuit. The political influence of Berlin would be reinforced then. This would involve for the German merchant navy to enjoy the security that the configuration of the telegraphic world system had only provided to UK during the 19th century.

The initial wish of Grey's government had been to turn the Canaries into a copy of Madeira, that is, to pact with Spain the monopoly of the British companies over the cables in the islands. But the global circumstances were not the same any more and this pact never took place. The *Eastern Telegraph Co* and other British companies from the telegraph industry had to resign when its German competitors entered in a trading area hitherto controlled by them.

German achievements in telegraphy made Great Britain to come to its own conclusions in order to face the future<sup>28</sup>. It was desirable for the Imperial Defence Department to isolate all the German colonies as much as possible. In case of total war, the connection to Cameroon would be cut off immediately

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<sup>28</sup> "Committee of Imperial Defence. Report of Submarine Cable Communications in Time of War. Secret. 1911," NA: CAB 16/14.

from the kingdom of Bonny. What is more, all the cables with direct connection to Germany, including Vigo and Tenerife, would have to be cut off as well. The most appropriate formula to do this would be using cable-ships in the English Channel. Neither Spain nor Liberia could stop these cuts. This would also work for the cable from Monrovia to Pernambuco.

Thus, the control over the cables in north western Africa was an extremely significant matter discussed in depth at the highest level. It prompted the revision of the strategic value of the Atlantic archipelagos. The imperialist rivalry over this issue contributed to the escalation of the tension before the war. This represented a political and technological confrontation that reached one of its decisive moments between 1905 and 1914 on the days prior to the Great War.

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